

## THEATRE

### The tragic dreamer

THE BALLAD of Billy Lane, now at Sydney's Ensemble, is the second play by George Hutchinson in a trilogy on Australian dreamers.

Hutchinson's *No Room For Dreamers*, the first of the trilogy, was voted the best fringe play at the 1980 Edinburgh Festival.

Billy Lane opens with a laconic shearer-style character, O'Kerr (Peter Corbett) giving us a thumbs-in-braces run-down on the dreams and dramatic events in the life of Billy Lane, played by a palely intellectual, passionate and bespectacled Bill Conn.

Because of his club foot Lane repudiates God and assumes a god-like role which leads him and 250 followers to set sail in 1893 in a little ship, *The Royal Tar*, to establish a socialist-inspired New Australia in Paraguay.

Here, with mateship, the camaraderie of the bushman and bushwoman, some Marx, some Engels and some workers they hope to turn jungle into a working man's paradise where everybody, even women, as long as they're WASP and it's not washing day, will enjoy equality.

What's more, Lane intends to outdo God and create a perfect society of teetotalers and single celibates.

Based on historical fact, the play is an imaginative interpretation of turn-of-the-century events.

Billy Lane regularly wrote for the left-wing press at a time when Australia, with its land-booms and busts, its shearers' strikes and Great Depression of the 1890s, left more than the usual mobs ready and willing



Bill Conn, surrounded by fellow dreamers, plays the title role in *The Ballad of Billy Lane*.

to buy into any brand of salvation or casual Messiah's dream. By leading them across the water (without wave parting) Lane fulfilled some of his own and others' dreams.

Lane's dreams are short-lived. Shortly after arrival, complications break out in New Australia when the blokes ignore the ban on booze and set up a roaring trade in rakes and hoes in exchange for Indian women and fiery local rum.

Lane, Bible-basher, wowsler and idealist, is haunted by fire-and-brimstone-breathing Rev Calvin Chappell (Bill Pearson), a satanic alter-ego to Lane, who lusts for punishment and the vindication of his vengeful God. This constitutes the seed of evil which Lane and his dreamers transport to their New Australia. It is the contaminating past which they thought they had left behind.

Meanwhile, Lane's new religion is socialism until it also, inevitably, fails to high fly with his dreams.

Eventually the words Paraguay and Paradise become synonymous in the minds of Lane's followers until a sexist, low-life, lusty worker, Stumpy

Wilson (Mervyn Drake), decides to start kicking the Lane law-and-order statutes.

Mervyn Drake's music and the musical direction of Peter Casey deserve a special mention. Sparkling, racey, it punctuates and laces this lively production holding its large-scale epic style together.

The cast works hard applying themselves to a multiplicity of roles, maintaining a light-hearted knockabout, sideshow style of immense entertainment value.

Authentic Paraguayan costumes, blankets, hats and shawls add a flamboyant and indifference in contrast to Lane's no-grog, no-go gravity.

Keith Bain's choreography creates striking images reminiscent of romantic old sailing ship voyages, fast-moving dance routines and interesting tableaux inspired by the propaganda heroic poster art of Russia and Germany.

There are no deep dramatic moments but Lane's eventual disillusionment, despair and loneliness are conveyed. Lane, stranded on the pinnacle of his idealism, finally decides to step-down, dragging his dream and dreamers with him.

— BERWYN LEWIS